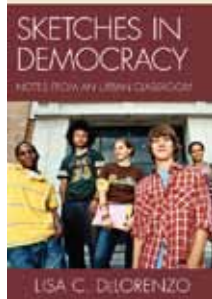


Appropriate Urban Teaching Philosophies

A Book Review of *Sketches in Democracy*

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LISA DELORENZO, a professor of music education at Montclair State University, took an extraordinary leap of faith by using her sabbatical year to teach for the very first time within an urban school setting. Her recognition of her limitations in preparing preservice teachers for an urban school environment without herself having had that experience speaks volumes of her reflective capabilities, which she also employed in writing *Sketches in Democracy: Notes from an Urban Classroom*



(Rowman & Littlefield, 2012), a thought-provoking analytical narrative of her experience teaching in a newly fledged charter conceived as a democratic school. Her overall purpose for writing this book was an attempt to “unravel what it means to test one’s teaching, humble one’s spirit, and question one’s values on a daily basis” (DeLorenzo, 2012, p. 2).

The author sings in two voices—the urban classroom teacher and the educational researcher—artfully harmonizing her journal writings and recollections about specific events within her teaching day with her analyses of those events within the larger educational and social system. By using a narrative style, the author’s hope is to provide a rich contextual description of what it means to be an urban teacher that also serves as a jumping off point for preservice teachers to develop appropriate urban teaching philosophies. She bolsters the narrative with relevant and poignant findings from educational research, greatly increasing the ability to generalize from her singular experience.

In overview, DeLorenzo’s book follows her journey through the teaching year, starting with chapter one, “Birthing a School While Still in Labor,” in which she recalls the disastrous first day of school as students did not have desks, teachers did not have the space or materials needed, and the school administration did not develop a cohesive, democratic philosophical foundation. It is every teacher’s first-day nightmare. From that low point, the author confronts the mismatch between expectations of, between, and among students, teachers, administrators, and the community. In the subsequent chapters “The Trouble with Mismatched Expectations” and “Playing School is Not the Real Thing,” she concludes that cultural responsiveness—knowing the students within their context—is the initial step to the growth of a democratic school. As the school year and the book progresses,

DeLorenzo examines the relationships that formed between the students and her, questioning how to balance respect for the students’ autonomy and creation and maintenance of a positive learning environment. In “Teachable Moments, Part 1” and “Part 2,” DeLorenzo tells of a music program the students created and performed for the entire school. In the last act, students dressed and danced in a way that stunned the faculty with its overt sexuality. While the adults were dismayed,

the students were very proud of their work, and the situation catalyzed a breakthrough discussion in which students wrestled with their responsibility to the larger social fabric of the school environment. In “Mid-Year Reflection,” DeLorenzo cleverly parallels how teachers often use holiday breaks to reflect on their teaching and work on their craft with her own presentation of what the research community tells us about the urban teenager. In the remaining chapters, the author synthesizes her experience and philosophy about the connection between democracy and urban education.

What it means to be an urban student and teacher as well as what the main goal of education should be are two main themes woven together throughout the book but brought into sharp relief in the concluding chapters. In “White Teachers, Urban Schools,” DeLorenzo describes her discomfort in being White, middle-class, and in a position of power and exemplifies the unflinching manner in which she approached issues of urban teaching. Race and identity are underlying themes present in most chapters as are other complex issues affecting schooling, such as socioeconomic status, gangs, power, and gender. However, the author never uses deficit language in discussing these difficult topics, instead choosing to focus on what the students have instead of what they do not. The author displays amazing empathy as she attempts to really understand who her students are while at the same time discovering herself. From this same chapter, the author reflects:

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I will never fully know what it is like to be Black or Latino. I understand that the color of my skin affords me many advantages and I recognize that I don't do enough to celebrate the contributions of Black and Latino racial groups. Their musical culture is rich, yet I am not doing enough to celebrate the musical heritage of students of color. As I think about it, I wonder if I am afraid—afraid to teach something for which I have no first-hand, living experience. (DeLorenzo, 2012, p. 99)

In addition to looking closely at the characteristics of urban students and teachers, the author also tackles a larger philosophical question: What is the purpose of education? As the title of the book suggests, DeLorenzo asserts that school is a microcosm for our democratic society and as such should provide a place for students to acquire and practice democratic strategies and principles. She draws on Freire's critique of the current schooling system as one in which teachers are merely bankers of information and children are depositories of knowledge, which DeLorenzo argues will lead to "a citizenry of oppressed and compliant individuals devoid of the tools for collective action in pursuit of the common good" (DeLorenzo, 2012, p. 8). In proposing a solution, the author quotes Dewey to suggest we should rather "have a type of education which gives individuals a personal interest in social relationships and control, and the habits of mind which secure social changes without introducing disorder" (DeLorenzo, 2012, p. 58). The author clearly aligns with the philosophical concept of a democratic school, but she details the many obstacles in the practical creation of such a type of school—the most difficult barrier being the disorder that Dewey warned against.

What DeLorenzo found was that most of the students were uncomfortable with the power shift from teachers as the authority to shared power between teachers and students, which one might argue is the very reason that a democratic school is needed! This disparity is brought into sharp focus when the teachers visit a high-achieving inner-city charter. In reflection, she writes:

The school had structures in place that urban students need so desperately. Yet, if teachers are marginalized from decisions that effect [sic] their classrooms, how much more so are students who sit quietly in rows . . . Perhaps the other school excelled because rules and regulations had been firmly established. We definitely fall short in this area. I am confused. Everything seems to work so beautifully in that school . . . except for a sense of democratic practice. (DeLorenzo, 2012, p. 111)

In "The Democratic School: Is It Worth It?" DeLorenzo claims that it is difficult to establish a democratic school in the face of many barriers: having to find the balance among control

and unbridled freedom, a mismatched authoritative administration, and lack of resources. However, she asserts the concept is worth it, and in her reflective hindsight, she provides some general ideas of how a school could ease these tensions, namely by first developing trust and care between the teachers and students and among the students.

One of my only issues with this book was my desire to see more narrative, not in lieu of the analysis but to provide a fuller narrative arc of key classroom events. Particularly, the author often presents the crisis without ever circling back to the resolution. However, overall, the author achieves her purpose: to create a narrative for preservice teachers (as well as in-service teachers) to develop critical pedagogy through reflection and discussion. It is not a reductionist how-to manual; instead the author opted to include all of the richness and complexity that typifies a more realistic urban teaching setting and did so rather successfully.

This book would be a valuable resource in a preservice teacher preparation program, with an eye toward aiding the development of a critical pedagogy framework that is better fit to current urban teaching contexts. This is no small task as many urban teachers either leave the profession permanently or migrate to suburban schools, and many urban students do not graduate either at all or with the ability to achieve their individual dreams. This book would also provide a seed for in-service teachers to critically reflect on their practice through a book study group or personal journaling. Educational administrators might consider this book in re-evaluating the negative and pervasive effects of inequity of power within their school communities. Ultimately, this book argues for the inherent connection between education and democracy because, as has been stated before:

Much that is unsatisfactory, much of conflict and of defect, comes from the discrepancy between the relatively undemocratic organization of the school, as it affects the mind of both teacher and pupil, and the growth and extension of the democratic principle in life beyond school doors. (Dewey, 1903, p. 193)

To that end, this book offers a pragmatic and philosophical beacon of hope.

References

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